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“Doe: a Deer, a Female Deer...?": Counter-Reading *Bambi* as a Crypto-Fascist Dream

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Why [is] this movie so extremely popular [?]: While officially agreeing with our democratic ideology, it at the same time addresses our secret fascist dreams.

--Slavoj Žižek, on *The Sound of Music*

In 1942, just months after the attack on Pearl Harbor roused an officially-isolationist (and in some quarters, fascist-sympathetic) America to come to the aid of the occupied and 'blitzed' European Allies, Walt Disney released his fifth film, *Bambi*. Directed by David Hand and animated by the Chinese-American muralist Tyrus Wong, it was adapted from a 1923 novel by Felix Salten, an Austro-Hungarian Jew then living in exile in Switzerland. The film, as the book before it, was derided by the mid-century 'gun lobby' as both anti-hunting and anti-German, and thus pro-environmentalist and pro-persecuted [read: Jew] (see Smith 2004: 521-31; Sterba 1997: A20; Di Marzo 1999: 29).

For these very reasons, progressives embraced the book and the film when they first appeared, and the latter continues to win accolades seven decades later.¹ Indeed, given this reception, the author Salten's personal biography, and the politically fraught milieu in which he

wrote and the film was made, *Bambi* seems incontrovertibly to be a text of the ideological left. The Nazis themselves concurred, banning and burning the book in the late 1930s before hounding its author out of Austria to Switzerland—and thus paralleling the mythologized Von Trapp family's flight in *The Sound of Music*, to which we shall soon turn. And like the Hollywood-be-knighted Von Trapps, Salten had his own fairy godfather, in Max Schuster--founder of the Publishing house Simon and Schuster--who would release the book's English translation and, more fatefully, introduce Salten to Walt Disney (Di Marzo 1999: 29).

Thus, *Bambi* seems a bona fide liberal. And in the post-'68 era, it could even be read as anti-colonial and deeply (if naïvely) ecological, juxtaposing “Man’s” relentless rapaciousness against a peaceful “animal kingdom” existing in a harmonious state with nature. The review offered here, however, makes two counter-moves to challenge this settled interpretation. First, it follows in both technique and to its conclusion Slavoj Žižek’s own critique of *The Sound of Music*, where he identifies a fascistic ideology encoded in that ostensibly liberal musical. Second and more generally, it shows how Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage”--and thus how gendered identities and hierarchies are initiated and maintained and to what effects--form the very basis of *Bambi*’s plot and character arch. Viewed from this Lacanian-Žižekian perspective, far from a simple coming-of-age cartoon about a cute little deer, *Bambi* looks to be decidedly *other-wise*.

Žižek: Our Perverted Guide to the Fascist Ideology Encoded in "Liberal" Cinema

In Slavoj Žižek’s (2004) critique of *The Sound of Music* quoted at the outset, he suggests that the film’s staying power lies in a psychological sleight-of-hand: “While officially agreeing with our democratic ideology, it at the same time addresses our secret fascist dreams.” In his astute deconstruction, I find many fruitful parallels to *Bambi*. Both films are dramas dealing with extremely serious subject matters and yet are told through genres often seen as trivial: animation and the musical. Each film remains among the most popular and beloved of all time irrespective of genre, and has been re-released numerous times. Furthermore, *The Sound of Music* is an overtly anti-Nazi text, while *Bambi*, as mentioned above, was interpreted by many--including Hitler--as anti-fascist in *sub-text*.

It is on this third point that Žižek's Lacanian reading is most valuable for my purposes. Žižek's first move is to read *The Sound of Music* as a "simple narrative reality." He notes that

"politically ... officially ... as we *all* know its story": It is one of "small, honest, democratic Austrians fighting [and] resisting the Nazi occupation of Austria in '38." But then he invites us to "look more closely ... at its *virtual* texture." Our attention is directed to "all these micro-signs, maybe we could even call it *writing*." In doing so we notice that, on the one hand, each of the Austrians depicted in the film--from Fraulein Maria to Captain Von Trapp to his train-car load of *Kinder*--celebrate the local, the rural, the "real" Austrian *Volk*. As Žižek notes: "They are presented directly [and quite sympathetically] as *anti*-intellectual, rooted in a narrow life world."

I would extend Žižek's analysis here to point out that it was *not* reason, but *doing*--that is, *Macht*--that was glorified by the fascists, from the Hitler Youth to Mussolini's Black Shirts. Further, the Austrians are all depicted in rude Aryan health ("hygiene," of course, being a Nazi obsession) and simultaneously--this being Austria--as good Catholics. And yet in the last instance the film's male- and national-chauvinist ethos prevails: When duty to the Catholic Church collides with that to the nation and family--in the form of motherhood--it is nation and family that wins out: *Volk und Vaterland, über alles*. 'How *do* you solve a problem like Maria's'? By breaking one's oath to God, Church, and celibacy, and by assuming one's rightful, natural (indeed, God-given) place as singing (step-)mother and helpful wife, this film avers.²



Žižek further directs our attention to the manner in which the ostensible "enemy," or the occupying Nazis, is presented. They are *not*, by and large, seen as a brutishly masculine, invading force. On the contrary, their take-over is by stealth: Insinuation into social circles and the use of their cunning and wiles. *This* enemy is mostly comprised of "managers, bureaucrats, exquisitely dressed with short moustaches, smoking expensive cigarettes, and so on. In other words," Žižek reads, these *Ausländer* are "almost a caricature of [the] cosmopolitan, decadent, corrupted Jew." With all these moves, Žižek leads us to see that a surface, narrative reading of the film's overt plot is precisely contrary to the subliminal "fascist dream" coded in the micro-

signs of the virtual text, which he summarizes thus: "Honest fascists resisting a decadent, Jewish, cosmopolitan take-over." And this counter-reading, from his Lacanian perspective, may help explain the film's extraordinary staying power. It is one complementary to Foucault's unmasking of the productive (that is to say, near totalitarian) nature of *biopower* in modern bourgeois society. This reading suggests the uncomfortable realization of just how deep-seated, subconsciously powerful, and even *seductive*, fascism is as a psycho-socio-political structure.



Lacan's Mirror Stage as Gendered Character Arch and Societal Plot Device

With these insights drawn from Žižek's interpretation of *The Sound of Music*, we can similarly excavate the political subtext of *Bambi*. Before doing so, though, let us just quickly recall how, per Lacan (1991; 1992), gendered and social hierarchies come into being and are maintained and to what effects, since this process--the *mirror stage*—is so blatantly "staged" in *Bambi*. Lacan theorized that the male toddler must pass through the mirror stage in order to attain his socio-sexual identity and, thus, his subjectivity. The young male gazes into a mirror and, for the first time, realizes that his mother is both separate and different from him. With this realization he is readied to acquire language, and with language, "autonomy," "self-hood," "subjectivity," and the "Law of the Father," along with the concomitant separation from and subjugation/ denial/ death of the mother.

This differentiation represents a rupture with the pre-linguistic, Imaginary illusion of the unity of self-mother and with the male child's entrance--sometimes by force--into the Symbolic Order of language. Thus, texts, signs, discourse, and symbolization construct the hierarchical,

gendered identities of subject male vs. object female. This order is necessarily—though not exclusively—a patriarchal one, representing the "Law of the Father." It is said to be stabilized and perpetuated via newly-differentiated "he's" identifying with the hierarchy by being hailed as such—as *he*--and thus made subject to/in this order. It is also maintained by differentiating, and thus deprecating, the "she," beginning with the mother and then all other feminine objects thereafter. In such ways do these "he's" come to identify with the law, the father, and the Law of the Father. And thus does every *body*—he's and she's--come to be ordered accordingly.

Turning to film criticism, the "he," or the masculine-hailed subject of this order, possesses the agency of the *gaze* with which to voyeuristically look upon (feminized) objects. To watch and even to make a film, it has long been argued by traditional Lacanian film critics, is to partake in a masculinist re-enactment of the traumatic loss and separation that the male child experiences while he traverses from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order in the mirror stage. Watching a film thus triggers in the (male-)subject-gazer a subconscious longing for the pre-symbolic unity with Mother.³ That primal *lack* is the font of desire for the Other that can never be sutured or recovered, for there is no word--and thus no way--to conceive of or express this great loss. Hence, the unspeakable and excessive, pleasure-pain of *jouissance*.

Viewed in this way, we will see how *Bambi*, in both its main character arch and plotting, is a faithful, even *masterful*, rendering of the loss of unity with the mother (and the Imaginary phase), and of the traversal to total identification with the Law of the Father and the embrace of the hierarchical, Symbolic Order. And with this journey of our young male protagonist (Bambi) comes a successful appropriation of the male-subject identity, along with the disavowal of the feminine into subjugation, objectification, or total erasure. Connecting this discussion to Žižek's reading of *The Sound of Music*, it is in these gendered, hierarchical aspects that Disney's *Bambi* can be seen as sublimated fascism, par excellence.

Counter-Reading Bambi as Crypto-Fascist

Bambi opens with a pan through a deep, forested green Eden spliced with waterfalls and bird-play. An angelic choir signals that this is yet another story of "Hollywood's great subject ... heterosexuality (Hayward 2013: 214)." The female voices sing: "Love is a song that never ends, life may be swift and fleeting, hope may die yet love's beautiful music comes each day like the dah-ah-awn..." (But hope is not the only thing that will die in this tragic love story). We are next introduced to a series of cute critters as they scurry through the woods toward a nativity scene

of roe deer fawn snuggled tightly against his mother's breast. This babe is still in the pre-linguistic, Symbolic stage, unified with his (un-named) mother. Yet he is already being hailed as a male-marked subject, "The New Prince." His nameless mother, it should be noted, is not hailed or treated as "The Queen," suggesting either that this child is some lowly bastard, or that royalty only runs in the male line. In either case, when she is asked what she will call her child—and interestingly and rather against-story, she has the power to name the baby--we half-expect this demure Madonna to say "Jesus." But instead, she pronounces him "Bambi...my little Bambi."

This tender moment of mother-son bonding is quickly ruptured by a soaring, camera/gaze panning up and to the Right. Upon a ridge high above the trees stands a lone, towering stag looking down on/ over his dominion. His presence however does not seem menacing, but instead benignly imperial, somehow Right and natural. This reveal of the stag expands our view, and our knowledge, suggesting that it is *not* the anonymous mother who is ultimately responsible for this proto-subject, his protection, and his fate, but rather it is this aloof, towering Thing/Being/Father/Phallus the Stag-King.



Having endured this rather heavy pinnacle lesson, the audience is then rewarded with playful quotidian scenes of forest-dwelling society. Had we not just had this trench-coat dick-flash of a scene with the Stag, we could easily mistake this world for a matriarchy: For it is only mothers who lead and care for their children, and these mothers and other children together teach Bambi the societal ropes. The specter of patriarchy is never far from this world, however, such as when Thumper, a floppy-eared and big-mouthed bunny, is scolded by his (also un-named) mother via her hailing the Law of the Father. When the rabbit chides Bambi's clumsiness, and when he encourages him to eat only flowers and not greens, his mother cries, "Thumper! What did your *father* tell you?"

Perhaps not coincidentally, it is the oft-disciplined Thumper who teaches Bambi to *speak*. This sequence is an uncannily accurate display of how humans acquire language by

making associations and drawing distinctions. Bambi is first taught the word for "bird." Upon spying a butterfly, he logically calls *that* a bird, and is jokingly corrected. He then spots a patch of flowers and calls *that* butterfly (and is again corrected). Finally he finds a skunk among the floral blooms and calls him Flower--a misrecognition that sticks. "Perdy flower," says Bambi, to Thumper's hysterics and Flower the Skunk's delight. In this Rousseau-esque 'state of nature,' still sutured as they are to their mothers, the three young boys are in turns bashful and flirtatious. They are cuddly, adorable and adoring of each other. They act, tease, instruct, and giggle *like little girls*.⁴ That is, until they meet the "real thing" (a fawn) against which to test and distinguish themselves, and the other "real thing" (a pack of stags) to which they are called to aspire and emulate.



The next scenes symbolically signal the mirror stage by introducing water in all its forms: A thunderstorm in which Bambi hides by burrowing deep under his mother's belly, while at the same time being lured away by the siren song of "little April showers". In the dawn that follows, our gaze is directed down to the swollen river that nevertheless reflects the omniscient (Father) sky. This Big Sky looms as a red menace, signaling that we are about to be drawn or dragged into the Symbolic Order, come hell or high water.

This painful initiation--and mother-child dismemberment--will take place in the meadow. The meadow is revealed to be an open plain/plane of great danger, wonder, sociability and social ordering. And of death. At the stream on its far side, Bambi sees a reflection for the first time, yet how he views it is ambiguous to us the viewer. He bends in closer: to rub this other creature's nose, or simply to drink, or in recognition of himself? We are not sure, because just as suddenly another reflection appears, and this presence Bambi definitely registers as *other*. It is his young doe cousin, who, notably, is the only *named* female: Faline.

Let's pause to interpret what just happened, in Lacanian terms. Not only has Bambi had a successful mirror encounter from the perspective of his individuation; but further, at the very moment when his mother is symbolically differentiated from him--made Other and made object--

he is introduced to another female who will effectively replace his mother and become the object of his desire (and his own 'baby-mamma'). And yet this object, unlike his mother and all other females in the forest, possesses a proper name, Faline. The scene is thus open to multiple readings, including a potentially feminist or at least liberal one, pointing to a future partnership between the "new prince" and his soon-to-be "princess," based on a more egalitarian footing.

This latter reading is further suggested by the gendered 'role reversal' in which Faline takes charge and gives chase to her frightened and angered cousin. She makes Bambi stumble and fall in the water, then licks his ear and darts off. He furrows his brow and retreats to the protection of his mother's long spindly legs (the four-legged's equivalent of apron strings). It is his mother, chatting with Faline's, who makes the introductions, and who chides her son for being "scared" (of just a *girl*? is her subtext).

With these multiple affronts to his budding manhood, Bambi aggressively charges Faline, who again--perhaps upending gender roles--clearly enjoys it (or maybe she is just a stereotypical masochistic female). As if called into being by Bambi's newfound assertiveness, and as symbolic reinforcements, out of nowhere spring a pack of stags prancing in unison to military marching music. Bambi is a quick study: He bounds around the meadow and mounts rocks mimicking their lockstep. But he's not yet up to their level of *machismo*, and he cowers under a rock for fear of being trampled. (Throughout this display of force, Faline and the other females have disappeared). And then suddenly, all becomes quiet: "BEAT," as they write in screenplays, to connote a dramatic pause. In struts the oldest, the largest, Stag, who we first gazed up on, gazing down on Bambi's birth scene. The other stags stand erect at attention.

The Old Prince moves slowly, inspecting the line. He pauses before Bambi, regarding him, but betraying no emotion. The Stag passes out of sight. Afterward, an awe-struck Bambi exclaims to his mother, "He looked at me!" and questions why the other stags acted with such deference. His mother explains that the "Old Prince" is the most respected stag in the forest due to his being the eldest, and also because--or simply as a 'natural' benefit of age--"he's very brave and very wise." Her words are subliminally underscored by a wordless reprisal of the opening melody "Love is a song that never ends." But exactly who loves whom here, and what is the nature of this love? That is an open question.



Seasons pass: Autumn comes and Bambi gazes on dead leaves and his own reflection on the pond. In winter he is taught to ice-skate on the glass 'mirror' by his peer-mentor Thumper. But Bambi also learns what hunger, endurance, and suffering are in that cold season. And, finally, spring arrives, bringing green shoots to the meadow. Driven by both privation and excitement, by drive and desire—one might say by *jouissance*--Bambi and his mother burst forth to feast in the open plain/plane, a fateful act that precipitates their final rupture. GUNSHOTS. They rush from the hail of bullets, but Bambi alone survives this violent encounter with "Man." Disoriented and distraught, he wanders, crying "Mother!" At this very instant, winter and darkness again descends. But so does the Stag/Father: "Your mother can't be with you anymore" the Stag pronounces. This intense emotional scene takes place in shot-reverse shot. Bambi lacks words, and can only whimper. The Old Prince turns--and reveals, hails, claims, and names: "Come, *My Son*."



And with the Stag's words, the young roe's traversal from the Imaginary unity with the mother to the Symbolic Order and Rule of the Father is completed. We see no more mirrored-reflections. We do, however, observe further male maturation for this subject/ prince: His voice deepens, his horns lengthen, and he develops a socially appropriate, hetero-normative relationship with his pubescent male companions. Alas as this is a child's cartoon, we are not treated to the graphic growth of Bambi's sexual organs. But this is heavily suggested, and staged, first comically and then violently: One-by-one the male creatures are struck by the

dreaded "twitterpation" for a comely female counterpart, and their camaraderie breaks down along the way. In Bambi's case he succumbs to Faline, and his originally clumsy sexual awakening culminates in a lengthy fight-scene to win/ protect his would-be mate and object of desire from a rapist-buck. Bambi's passage to adulthood also brings injury, escape, and rescuing Faline from death by fire, with the help of his Father. And, finally, it brings fatherhood itself: of twins!--and hence, a besting of his own father. This is, after all, a *progressive* film.

In the story's cyclical denouement, the critters once again zip, fly and bound through the forest, mirroring the opening scene. This time they reach Faline, who is sheltering the object of their gaze—Bambi's baby twins--beneath her belly. *Our* gaze, nonetheless, is once again directed upward and to the Right, to the two stags towering above the scene: The now fully mature male, Bambi, poised proudly beside the Old Prince...who then turns away--in capitulation, or abdication--leaving his son, now a father/The Father, to stand alone at the forest's pinnacle.



QUEUE ANGELIC MUSIC. FADE OUT. THE END.

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Notes

¹ For example, *Bambi* ranked third best-animated film of all time (after *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Pinocchio*) in a 2008 American Film Institute poll. See American Film Institute 2008.

² While the nature of fascism is much-debated and is and was diverse in praxis, its two chief historical proponents, Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini, were opposed to feminism and gender equality and instead glorified the traditional male-headed family as the necessary microcosm and unit-level base upon which the broader socio-political-economic hierarchical order was to be built. Thus, patriarchy is a core feature of fascism. For further discussion, see references cited in Paxton 2004: 233-5.

³ I realize that this rendering of the masculine “gaze” reflects a traditional application of Lacan to film criticism, as exemplified in the works of Mulvey (1975) and Metz (1975), among many others of that generation, and that it does not reflect more recent contributions from Lacanian film theorists such as McGowan (2007), Copjec (1994; 2002), Andreescu (2013) and indeed Žižek beginning with his 1989 *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. I use the earlier and more simplistic view because it closely tracks *Bambi*'s plot and character arch in a way that the later importations of Lacan, while fuller and more faithful, are likewise more complex and nuanced than is needed for this particular reading. For a discussion of the history of Lacanian film theory, see Krips (1999) and McGowan (2007).

⁴ So much so that this viewer was jolted to learn, upon a second viewing, that they were, in fact, all gendered *male*: Having seen the film nearly forty years ago--my first, in fact--in its 1974 theatrical re-release at the age of 4 or 5, I had (falsely) remembered *Bambi* to be female, Thumper male, and was agnostic about that skunk named Flower. I had no recollection of Faline, or anyway no stored memory of her as a romantic or reproductive companion, because *Bambi*, to my mind, was a girl.